

The book of Acts records several instances of believers receiving the Holy Spirit, but there are some differences in precisely how and when this took place. Why is this the case?

This is a large question. I think there are five incidents in the Acts of the Apostles of people receiving the Holy Spirit, and they are different—so different as to appear contradictory. For instance, there is the occasion on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2) when the crowd is pricked in its heart and asks, ‘What shall we do?’ Peter’s reply was, ‘Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 2:37–38). There the order is repent (it doesn’t even say believe, but obviously it’s implied), be baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus (that is water baptism of course), and then you shall receive the Holy Spirit. Notice the order: repent, baptized, Holy Spirit.

If you look at the story of Cornelius (Acts 10) you see a very significant difference. While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, ‘Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?’ And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. (Acts 10:44–48)

So there it’s the opposite way around: Holy Spirit first, water baptism afterwards. Now just take those two for the moment. Why the difference? Some people would account for it on the grounds of what they call dispensations: that this was a changeover. Acts 2 is gospel going to Jews, conditions are special. Now in Acts 10 you’re moving off into the new Christian era and now this is gospel going to Gentiles. Well, of course that is the fact. Acts 2 is gospel to Jews, Acts 10 to Gentiles. But isn’t there something more in it than that?

At Pentecost

The people that Peter was preaching to on the day of Pentecost were the very same crowd that had stood around the cross of Christ, literally, and had shouted, ‘Crucify him!’ They had done it publicly. They said he wasn’t the Son of God, that he deserved to die. Now they profess that they’ve repented. Now the Bible everywhere, and you’ll see it especially with John the Baptist, isn’t necessarily prepared to take your word that you’ve repented, but will demand that you show that you mean what you say.

‘You say you have repented of having murdered Jesus? All right then, you will be baptized in his name, in the name of Jesus.’

‘Oh, no. I don’t want to do that. That would be awkward.’

‘It may be very awkward but you’ll have to do it. These are the men whose hands are stained with the blood of Christ. You can’t stand with them still and say you’ve repented, for God won’t take any notice of you. You won’t get his Holy Spirit until you show God your repentance is genuine and you’re prepared to stand away from

them—save yourself from them. You will now publicly confess him by getting baptized, and if you're not prepared to do that, sorry—your repentance doesn't mean anything at all.'

With Cornelius

When you have Cornelius, there is not that issue, of course. Cornelius hadn't stood with that crowd who crucified Jesus. He was a God-fearing man and wanted to please God. The very moment he heard about Jesus and knew the gospel of Christ, at that very moment he believed, and the Holy Spirit came on him. And, thereafter, he was baptized. That at least is how I would account for that difference.

Disciples of John the Baptist

As for the men we read of in Acts 19, my interpretation tries to proceed by pointing to what the text actually says. Paul came across these men, who are described as 'some disciples' (Acts 19:1). It does not call them 'Christians'! He asked them, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?'

Now please notice what he said. He doesn't ask whether they were baptized with the Holy Spirit or filled with the Holy Spirit, but did they receive the Holy Spirit when they believed. That drew the puzzled reply which I think he expected to draw.

'No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.'

Paul asked them, 'Into what then were you baptized?'

And they said, 'Into John's baptism.'

Well, I'll let you into the secret: they were not Christians at all! They'd come as far as John's baptism, which was expressive of repentance for forgiveness of sins, but John the Baptist had no authority to forgive anybody's sins. He could point you to the one that was to come after him, but you never get any scribes, Pharisees or anybody else bothering John the Baptist and saying, 'You're speaking blasphemies: you oughtn't to tell people their sins are forgiven'—because he never did anyway. He got them confessing their sins. He baptized them as an evidence of their repentance. But for the forgiveness of sins he had to point them to another who was coming; that is to Christ. It is one thing to repent. It is another thing to believe. It is possible to repent and not believe. And not until a man believes on the Lord Jesus does he get the Holy Spirit.

Check my exposition of this. Notice that Paul did not say to them, 'Well, you're believers all right, but there is something extra that believers can have now.' No, he didn't. He said,

John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus. (Acts 19:4)

So Paul is telling them that they will have to do what John had told them to do—believe on the Lord Jesus. You don't tell people to do that who are already Christians, do you? At this juncture they did believe on the Lord Jesus, of course. Paul didn't then say, 'Well, you've been baptized once so there's no need to go through that again.' No. For they weren't believers when they got baptized the first time. You can't count

baptism that happened before you were a believer. Paul isn't being narrow-minded: the whole truth of the gospel is involved in this.

What is Christianity? It is not just a system of repentance. There are many folks in Christendom and honestly before God they confess their sins, in private. You could ask them, 'Are you sure of salvation? When you believed, did you get eternal life? Did you get the Holy Spirit?' I asked precisely that question to some young gentlemen. They were saying they were children of God, and that they became children of God at their baptism. So I said, 'Oh, how interesting. Now, tell me, did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?' They didn't know either what I was talking about. Of course they didn't, because they had never learned what it means to believe on the Lord Jesus.

So these men had to learn to believe, and when they believed, they were saved and they received the Holy Spirit. Now they became Christians for the first time, and of course it was the first time. Paul commanded that they had to be baptized as Christians. So I would submit it to you that this is not a question of getting people who were already believers in Christ, who are missing out on some extra spiritual good they could have, and persuading believers in Christ to go in for this extra bit. It is a question of people who were not yet believers in the Lord Jesus, teaching them to believe in the Lord Jesus, and then confess their faith in him and get themselves baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

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Classification: Doctrine

Topics: baptism, church history, Holy Spirit, repentance, salvation

Scriptures: Acts 2:37–38; 10:44–48; 19:1–5

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Published by The Myrtlefield Trust
PO Box 2216
Belfast, N Ireland
BT1 9YR

w: www.myrtlefieldhouse.com
e: info@myrtlefieldhouse.com

Myrtlefield catalogue no: 1co.013.q01.p39-41/sc

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